

NETWORK

Bulletin of the Public Service Workers Network

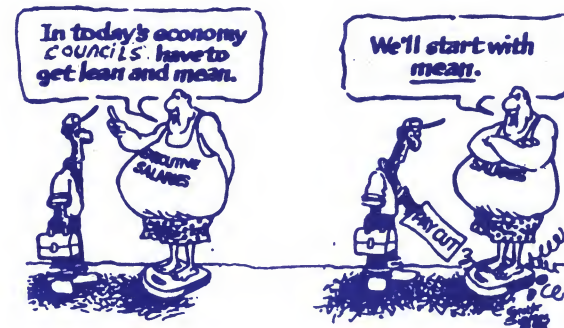
Issue 1

WHAT IS THE FUTURE FOR PUBLIC SERVICES

It has been estimated that by 1994 over 33000 jobs will have been lost in public services, predominantly in local authorities

During the 1980's Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) smashed manual workforces, as services like refuse collection, cleaning and catering were put out to tender, with contracts being judged on financial criteria. Now, those workers not picked out by the 1988 local Government act are facing the same threat. Also, in the pursuit of 'efficiency' and 'economy', councils are restructuring their workforces, leading to redeployment of workers to lower grades, in a move towards direct pay cuts.

The response of the public service unions has been to form the super union, UNISON. While we welcome moves to break down trade union sectionalism which has divided workers for so long, this must be seen for what it is: The main problem as the unions see it is that CCT is eroding their strength, the membership figures and their negotiating rights. The amalgamation of NUPE, NALGO and COHSE into UNISON is no more than a corporate deal, a way of making a single union deals in the newly privatised public services. As a single union for all grade and trades,



UNISON is more likely to get the 'contract' for organising workers. This tells us a lot about the unions attitude towards CCT and towards their members. How enthusiastic will they be in fighting to defend workers jobs when they are already looking forward to doing deals with the entrepreneurs and ex-senior manager taking over services. Obviously the lessons that the unions have taken from contracting out of services in the last decade, with the ensuing job losses, is that you can't do anything about it.

If the response of the unions to 'contract culture' is to copy it, how should public service workers respond. We cannot afford to be complacent, after all, as workers it is our jobs on the

line, and as users it is our services we face losing. Although we must push our unions to back us in whatever action we take, we would be foolhardy to depend on their ability or will to defend our jobs. Trade union membership is no substitute for real workplace organisation, or for real links between workers in different authorities. Whichever borough we work for, whichever health authority or voluntary organisation we work for, whichever union we are in we are facing the same kind of attacks. The way we organise should reflect this. We hope that NETWORK will play a part in encouraging a 'culture of resistance' among public service workers who for too long have struggled in isolation.

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

Thousands of workers working for charities, voluntary sector organisations, housing associations and local authority funded, privately owned nursing homes, face poor conditions and bad pay and are isolated from other workers in the same industry. The task facing those of us working in this section of the public service is colossal if we are to break this isolation and organise with other workers.

The usual form of workplace organisation, if it can be called that, that workers find themselves in are 'staff association'. This is a piece of bureaucratic machinery set up by management to smooth any personnel problems and give worker a false impression of being consulted and listened to. Where these organisations exist they hinder the ability of workers to make real links with each other.

The other option open to workers in this situation is to join a trade union. Despite claims by unions like the

M.S.F. (Manufacturing, Science and finance), that they will recruit us, trade unions are often unwilling or unable to organise workers in this sector.

My own experience will illustrate this. After years of discontent with a residential staff association, all the worker in my workplace decided to join the union that enjoyed negotiating rights with admin and social work staff employed by the organisation. When management said they wouldn't recognise the union unless they recruited 50% of the residential workers, not only did the union accept this they also admitted they were unable to do it. We were told by the union full-timer that they couldn't organise us, but it wasn't their fault, it was because management wouldn't let them. When management's hostility to the union is the only reason workers are still paying dues, this comes across like a bad joke. When management stopped deducting our dues at source, making us non-mem-

bers, the only reaction there was was one of relief. The only question asked at the next workplace meeting was whether we could get a refund on all the dues we'd paid. All we'd got for our money was a pile of glossy brochures advertising insurance, legal services, and telling us how the union was the one for residential workers.

With the increasing inability of existing unions to defend their own organisation, let alone the wages and conditions of the workers they claim to represent, even in industries with a history of unionisation, their is little prospect of traditionally unionised workers fighting to join them.

This still leaves us with the problem of how to organise with other workers and build a culture of resistance and confidence.

The public service workers network exists not only to encourage militancy and solidarity with people in unions, but also to break down the isolation of workers who are not, and may never have been unionised. We believe that workers in whatever sector, public or private, who want to organise and fight back should unite. We have more in common than divides us. With the fragmentation of local and health authorities into trusts and housing associations, and the ineffectiveness of unions, our common interest becomes all too apparent.

As workers are increasingly unwilling to risk their jobs fighting for moribund and ineffectual trade unions, and as these unions become more redundant, the Public Service Workers Network felt the time is right to start looking for new ways of organising.



COWBOYS CHARTER

The so-called citizens charter is the usual Tory con-trick. A few consumer protection measures have been thrown together as a cover for further privatisation and deregulation of public services and transport, as well as victimisation of ordinary workers. The commitment to public services is a fraud, just like the so called classless society. Instead it is elitism, two-tier services in education and health, and the profits of cowboy contractors and private medicine that is being promoted.

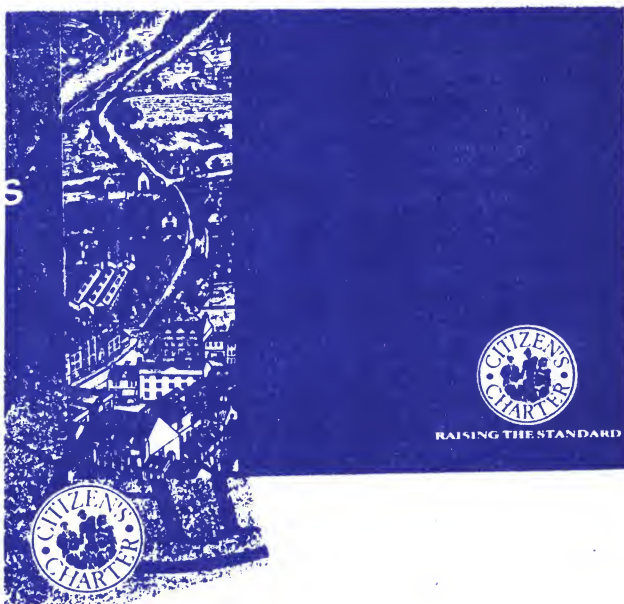
With the Tories winning the last election they can now continue to throw a party for the rich through privatisation and deregulation. Public service workers know punters do not meet the faceless bureaucrats who make arbitrary decisions which have a devastating impact on services. Forcing the low paid front-line workers who get the flak for these decisions to wear name badges is just opening the way for the victimisation of individuals who will be blamed for 15 years of underfunding. Since greater investment in public service and transport is not on the cards, the collective right to decent public services is not proposed by the charter. The issue is being buried by the red herring of individuals right to compensation for the inevitable failure to deliver. Incidentally, the right to compensation will apply only to public services - once it gets privatised, forget it.

Compensation will also be available from the organisers of 'unlawful

strikes (and presumably other forms of industrial action), subjecting shop stewards and branch secretaries to potential financial victimisation. If past experience is anything to go by, compensation provision will be used by far right groups like the freedom association to organise campaigns of financial haemorrhage against public services and victimisation of union activists. The Tories are planning a return to the attacks on public service workers by middle class 'Mr. Angrys - a feature of the early seventies.

Apart from NALGO putting out adverts saying don't blame public

service workers for the mess, the unions have been surprisingly silent. This is hardly surprising, giving their past ineffectiveness when confronted with Compulsory Competitive Tendering. Nor will they be too displeased if the charter curbs un-official industrial action, something the unions are only too willing to see less of anyway. If we are to find ways around the charter we are going to have to rely on ourselves, this means being organised to meet the victimisation of individuals with action. Whatever happens, we must not be scared of taking action whenever our pay and conditions are threatened.



NEWHAM WORKERS SECOND YEAR

Workers in the Poll Tax department of Newham council in East London went on strike over compulsory redundancies on 7th of January 1992. A year later about 800 NALGO members are still on strike, in spite of High Court injunctions lying propaganda costing £10,000 a week from the Labour controlled council.

The dispute has escalated steadily, with housing benefits coming out on 11th May, followed by other sections on a selective basis in June and July, culminating in an all out strike by NALGO on the 3rd August following a ballot. All this has been on full take home pay from the union, because it is a matter of principle and because the council's intransigence is seen by NALGO HQ as a threat to negotiating rights.

An increasing emphasis on central backing for strategic disputes which effect the unions negotiating rights is a feature of NALGO's local government activities, and is likely to carry over into UNISON as it drifts in on a tide of apathy later this year. HQ involvement in negotiations, and financial control through full take home strike pay, allow control to pass from local level to HQ. This means Keith Sonnet and Co. can force compliance with Tory anti-union laws, stifle any demands they find inappropriate, and make



A LABOUR COUNCILLOR IN
NEGOTIATIONS WITH NALGO.

sure NALGO members don't do anything which will threaten the unions corporate interests - interests the formation of a super union with NUPE and COHSE was designed to protect. In September Newham Council

took out a high court injunction against the all out strike, and NALGO ordered its members back to work for the five days it took to win in court. At the end of the month workers found out that NALGO had decided to send

NEWHAM WORKERS SECOND YEAR

Continued

them back to work as the object of the strike ballot in August had been achieved. Strikers occupied NALGO HQ in protest, as there were other demands to be met by the council. Shortly after this, a lobby of the NEC's emergency committee (which controls official strikes) was met by the police! But some strikers still managed to get into the HQ and sit down outside the General Secretary's office. The Emergency Committee decided to re-ballot on the outstanding demands.

This time around, about 800 workers had been out since 3rd November 1992. Since Newham NALGO membership is 2,400 -

and only 1,400 were involved in the first bout of all out action - it only goes to prove that full take home pay is not the guarantee of strike action some make it out to be. Solidarity, strong workplace organisation and confidence are what get people out, and what win disputes - not the state of the bank balance. All these are being eroded by the same process of protecting corporate interests (especially the funds) which is the union leaderships top priority.

NALGO's response to the problems of fighting cuts has been to throw money at disputes where negotiating rights are at stake, with some short term success.

The long term effect is to further erode workplace organisation and local initiative, and to isolate disputes within the limits of workers balloted to strike on full pay. Our network is committed to the long term build up of workplace organisation, solidarity, confidence and to restoring initiative and control to the workers in dispute. If a dispute is important enough to throw money at, it's important enough to defy the law and organise solidarity action. Newham workers can win, but after a year out they deserve a bit of help and support from council workers across London and to be held up as an example.

NALGO NEWS

Number 562

Week ending 19 February

Valiant Newham strikers return to work

NEWHAM'S 800 strikers reluctantly returned to work this week on the advice of NALGO's leadership, which was forced to conclude that the present strike could not be won.

It takes to end 12 months of officers which are NALGO's recently joined the job of poll tax staff threatened with compulsory redundancies and denied the right to campaign for strike action in the Appeal Court.

■ Full report on page seven

Local government branches reject per cent pay ce

Group meeting urges day of protest

■ by David Whitfield

LOCAL government branches have rejected the government's 1.5 per cent pay freeze and called for a programme of action, including industrial action, to resist compulsory competitive tendering.

And delegates to the local government group meeting in Blackpool last week called for a day of massive demonstrations on pay cuts and industrial action.

to and including strikes around legitimate disputes in March.

With the government's total bungling of the economy, it was looking to resolve its problems with the most serious cuts in the public sector. Joan Garratt of the national local government committee said the meeting of branch delegates from around the country.

"Now is the time for local government to say it is not prepared to accept what the government is threatening us."

More local government group meeting reports on pages 6 and 7

the pound could have lost all the cuts in local government made last year and planned for this year - and still left change over said Metcalfe.

The government wants the public sector to pay for its piggy bank said.

This year local government could face 20,000 job losses.

A further 80,000 jobs will be under threat as the government's 1.5 per cent cuts the British economy of 1993.

she said. The £20 billion which the government spent propelling up

NETWORK

FASCISTS ATTACK TRADE UNIONS

Workers in Tower hamlets found recently that the NALGO offices had been ransacked and daubed with racist graffiti. It is not only because of their racist policies and racist violence that these scum must be smashed. They will also attack workers wherever they are organised. It is in the interest of all workers, of whatever colour or culture, to stamp out fascism wherever it rears its ugly head.

SOLIDARITY IS NOT A LUXURY BUT A NECESSITY



ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM

Anti-Fascist Action responds

WE READ with interest the NEC's reasons for not supporting NALGO's affiliation to AFA - Anti-Fascist Action.

The decision was clearly made with a lack of knowledge. Errors were presented as facts and no effort appears to have been made to check with AFA representatives.

Firstly AFA is not a splinter group from the Socialist Workers' Party. But one of the AFA founding groups is Red Action. Red Action is not a splinter from the SWP, its members were in fact expelled from the SWP because they considered it necessary to physically confront fascists on the streets.

A majority of AFA members are working class and belong to a cross section of the political left. Members include those with affinities for the Direct Action Movement, anarchists, the Labour Party

and those of no affiliation.

The one thing we have in common is that fascism has nothing to offer working class people and therefore must be opposed by all means necessary, both ideologically and physically.

We also take great exception to the assumption that AFA is not democratic. AFA, unlike the Anti-Nazi League and the Anti-Racist Alliance has an individual membership system based on local groups. Each member is equal and has a right to a say in how the local group develops and are entitled to an equal vote.

Does this sound like an undemocratic organisation? But sorry, we'd forgotten that NALGO's NEC displays exemplary democratic accountability!

On the allegation that AFA has nothing to offer black

people our views are very straightforward.

AFA does not believe it has to educate black people about racism and fascism as they have intimate experience of these.

We reject the patronising attitude of other organisations.

Black communities have shown the lead in confronting racism and fascism, here in Newham, Southall, Dewsbury and even Los Angeles.

These lessons have been taken on board by AFA members.

AFA has never hidden the fact that we concentrate on the white working class. This is because fascism has always attempted to divide the working class using misguided and disillusioned elements as its foot soldiers during times of economic crisis, only to turn them in fa-

vour of the bosses as the Nazis did during the Night of the Long Knives.

Last year saw four racist murders in London alone as fascists continue to propagate and perpetrate acts of racial terrorism.

The British National Party received 20 per cent of the vote in an Isle of Dogs local election in October 1992.

David Irving has got the "Holocaust denial" campaign firmly on the agenda.

Finally, the smashing-up of a NALGO office in Tower Hamlets just before Christmas was a timely reminder that fascism will not only use racism, but any other means at its disposal, to attack working class unity and organisation, in the interests of the bosses.

NEWHAM AFA ACTIVISTS

STOP PRESS

The Newham strikers have been ordered back to work by the NALGO NEC after withdrawing strike pay on the 12th February 1993. The reason they put forward was that they couldn't see an end to the strike as Newham council didn't look like they were going to budge. We'll have more information for the next issue of network.

NETWORK CAN BE CONTACTED AT THE FOLLOWING ADDRESSES:

PUBLIC SERVICE WORKERS NETWORK

P.O. BOX 29
SW PDO
MANCHESTER
M15 5HW

C/O 84b WHITECHAPLE
HIGH STREET
LONDON
E1 7QX

Please write for more information, or with articles, comments, etc.